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RITA SINGER

Reviews

Pacifism, Peace and Modern Welsh Writing

Linden Peach

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We live in strange times. As I am writing this review, Prime Minister Johnson has just finished his hapless address to the cameras, talking about pushing his agenda on 'many fronts', 'chopping legs' and 'arming' and 'fortifying' himself against 'swords of Damocles' that he says the EU is hanging over all our heads. These are not the considered words of a thoughtful man but those of a manipulator. His language of war brutalises, desensitises and makes the formerly outrageous commonplace as it wears out his critics emotionally and his supporters intellectually.

Johnson is not a singular occurrence. He stands in a proud tradition of socially acceptable militarism in this country. We have just emerged from a four-year commemoration period that legitimised contemporary militarism through evoking the ghosts of Britain's military dead, heroically laying down their lives for their country. The voices commemorating conscientious objectors, dead civilians or – dare I mention it – dead enemies were few and far between, often drowned under an avalanche of red poppies. One of these rare voices found its way into print this year in the shape of Linden Peach's excellent study of pacifism in modern Welsh writing.

Over seven chapters, Peach broadly charts the development of pacifism in Wales during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, arguing that 'Welsh pacifism is not simply an opposition to war but addresses the structural roots of conflict in society and the social causes of inequalities including gender, class, ethnicity and race, and in doing so supplants them by pro-peace values' (p.4). The demarcation between anti-war and pro-peace attitudes may at first sight seem unnecessary. However, Peach's literary-historical approach meticulously excavates this distinction and how it arose following the First World War.

Before diving into individual case studies, Peach presents a detailed overview of the developmental stages of pacifism in Wales. He argues that pacifism and pacifist thought are not only a continuous process (rather than absolute states), but also form a choir of voices that do not always sound in unison. Especially in the first two decades of the twentieth century, he argues, there was a distinct difference between 'absolute' and 'conditional' pacifists. The former rejected any form of war and violence, whereas the latter considered wider circumstances under which participation in war might be acceptable (pp.12-13). Peach highlights the Welsh particularity of these early pacifists as they also rejected structural violence, equally campaigning against social and economic injustices which they saw as immediate precursors to armed violence.

Peach further stresses that many Welsh pacifist intellectuals hailed from a comparatively small and increasingly contracting pool of Welsh-speaking Nonconformists, predominantly from a rural background. This circumstance resulted in a uniquely intimate, intellectual 'brotherhood' in which the main contributors were deeply acquainted with each other's work and thought. They 'recognised' each other on a spiritual and philosophical level. Particularly in his discussion of Waldo Williams, Peach identifies these key ideas and terms of this group in several of the author's works, such as 'brawdoliaeth', 'teulu' or 'adnabod' (p.118). These terms, he argues, illustrate the complex philosophy and structure of feeling that inform Waldo's writing, as well as the overall impact of the Welsh language on pacifist intellectuals in Wales.

It is impossible in this review to cover all of Peach's detailed case studies, which include works by George M. Ll. Davies, Glyn Jones, T. E. Nicholas, R. Gwenallt Jones and Emyr Humphreys, to name but a few. Even the radical non-fiction contributions by Iorwerth Peate and Ned Thomas are given ample space outside the case studies. However, Peach takes great care in highlighting Welsh intellectuals' androcentricity, whilst stressing the significant work undertaken by the Welsh women involved in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and Women for Life on Earth. Indeed, Peach highlights Lily Tobias's *Eunice Fleet* (1933) and Angharad Price's *O! Tyn y Gorchudd* (2002) as influential contributions to pacifist writing and argues that both novels illustrate how pacifism and pacifist thought are deeply gendered. This gendered dynamic within pacifism produces very different lives for women than for men. As women are compelled to retreat to the Welsh countryside in order to escape the social and economic violence of urbanity to which they are uniquely exposed, they might find a personal liberation, albeit at the cost of intellectual limitation.

My biggest take-away from Peach's study of pacifism in modern Welsh writing is the invitation to read other, and even earlier texts through the lens of Welsh pacifist thought, even though they may not seem obvious candidates. Amy Dillwyn's and Allen Raine's novels spring to mind for their social criticism. Dillwyn's satirical approach may be more on the nose than Raine's conservative and mannered style. However, below the surface, both writers express similarly radical ideas where non-violence and peacefulness are concerned, as demonstrated so clearly in Peach's study.

Rita Singer is a researcher with an interest in Welsh writing in English, heritage and the history of tourism.